

# **Staying Close**

**A Lent Course exploring  
intimacy with God**

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**Russell Herbert**

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# kevin mayhew

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## About the author

Revd Dr Russell Herbert is a Methodist Superintendent minister, with a background in both youth work and theological research. He currently serves on the team at Christchurch, Clevedon, a vibrant and fast-growing ecumenical church in North Somerset.

He is also the author of *Growing through the Church: A practical and theological vision for all-age worship* (Kevin Mayhew, 2013) and *Living Hope: A practical theology of hope for the dying* (Kevin Mayhew, 2014).

## **Before you start, read this . . .**

This course has been written for small groups to use during Lent. It could actually be used any time of year, but it has been structured over six sessions in order to run through the six weeks of Lent, with a seventh session for Easter.

The material is targeted towards individuals, but individuals meeting with others in a group setting. This means that it would in theory be possible to simply read this book on your own, although the discussion-based activities would need to be used as personal reflection, which is of course more limiting. It is therefore recommended that the sessions be used in a small group context. This might involve anything up to about ten participants, although a smaller group makes for a more intimate level of interaction between members. Some of the activities and action points encourage group participants to reflect or undertake a task individually. At such points, it is assumed that group members will feel comfortable and relaxed about openly sharing their thoughts. However, groups should not feel bound by this and may prefer to simply pause for quiet reflection if that is considered more appropriate.

Participants will probably find that the sessions run most effectively if a leader is appointed within the group. In recognition of the business of life, the sessions have been written so that it is just about possible for the leader to be able to lead the group with relatively little preparation beyond reading through the material beforehand. However, for groups to get the most out of each session it is recommended that all participants prepare by reading

through the session's introduction, Bible passage and short commentary. This isn't essential, but it is likely to enrich the group discussion enormously.

In preparing the material, the intention has been to provide a resource that can be used more or less 'off the shelf'. It isn't intended to be regarded as a 'script' to be slavishly followed, so please feel free to adapt it in order to make it work for you.

## Introduction

‘God is closer to you than your own breath.’ I’m not sure exactly where that quotation comes from, but it’s something I have heard stated on more than one occasion. It’s quite a thought. We cannot see, hear or physically touch God, but he is much, much closer to us than we recognise.

How close to God do you feel right now?

For millions of people throughout history and in the world today, intimacy with God has been and is a genuinely personal experience. God may not be visible, audible or tangible, but countless people of all ages and from vastly diverse cultures worldwide will testify to a very real sense of the presence of God. Many speak of sudden, dramatically transformational encounters that have taken place quite unexpectedly and have turned lives upside down. Others are more familiar with a gradual, ongoing experience of being held and sustained by God’s presence. Whether sudden or gradual, or a combination of both, this is something that deserves to be taken seriously.

It is also very important to recognise that there are times when God can seem distant, if not altogether absent. Such reality should be taken seriously and it will not suffice to offer pat clichés in response to the searching questions that arise out of such times. Sadly, such experiences often lead people to decide that God just does not exist. That may be understandable, but it can also be too simplistic a conclusion to draw. The testimony of others who describe the positive impact of their experience of God’s reality is too great to simply be dismissed on the grounds that we have not had that same experience ourselves.

Sensing the distance or absence of God is actually a very well-trodden path in the history of Christian experience. We will explore this in the second session, ‘Staying close to God in the wilderness’. Here at the outset, though, we might note that at the heart of Christian faith is the story of Jesus on the cross, crying out loud with a sense of utter God-forsakenness. The experience of God’s absence is to be found at what is arguably the most sacred moment of all.<sup>1</sup> God-forsakenness is, paradoxically, taken up into God’s own experience. When we find ourselves in that place, we may thus find assurance that God has been there before us and can be found there by us. And of course, as Easter tells us, the story doesn’t end there.

We may not always consciously ‘feel’ the presence of God. But we can be sustained in the conviction that God’s closeness is far greater than our awareness of it. The sessions in this book invite you to explore this conviction and to press into it.

### **Intimacy with God in the Bible**

The closeness of God is a recurring theme in the Bible. God frequently promises people that he will be with them, especially in difficult circumstances. Examples include Isaac (Genesis 26:3), Joshua (Joshua 1:5, 9), Gideon (Judges 6:12) and Paul (Acts 18:10). The psalmist asserts that ‘The Lord is near to all who call on him’ (Psalm 145:18). Indeed, Christian faith is founded on the person of Jesus – the one who is identified as ‘Emmanuel’, meaning ‘God is with us’ (Matthew 1:23). Matthew’s Gospel concludes with Jesus’ promise as he returns to his Father in heaven ‘I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28:20).

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1. Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34.

Of course, the word ‘with’ need not in itself denote an intimate presence. I might be ‘with’ other people on a bus or queuing in a shop, but that does not mean that I am ‘close’ to them in any personal way. It’s important then to point out that, when the scriptures speak of the God who is ‘with’ us, they do so in a biblical context that describes that same God as the one whose presence is distinctively intimate. ‘You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me’ says the psalmist (Psalm 139:5). With the same intimacy, Jesus invites, ‘Abide in me as I abide in you’ (John 15:4). It is in this respect that Paul describes the believer as a temple in which God’s Spirit dwells (1 Corinthians 3:16); Christ is ‘in’ us, ‘the hope of glory’ (Colossians 1:27). By his grace, God becomes present *in* the believer, and the believer is given a renewed identity *in* Christ (Colossians 2:6-15; Ephesians 2:10). Therefore 1 John 4:13 declares that ‘we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit’.

### **Intimacy and the mystery of God**

It should be stressed that the notion of intimacy with God in no way undermines the equally important biblical assertion that God is mysterious. Whenever we talk about Christian faith as a personal relationship with the living God (which it is), an inherent danger is that the nature of this relationship, and indeed, the nature of God, may be misunderstood so that God is regarded casually. In a series of Lent lectures entitled ‘Let God be God’ back in 1990, Colin Morris warned of precisely this danger:

The greatest challenge to faith in our time comes not from atheists denying God, but from believers diminishing him – treating him with sort of cosy familiarity

and addressing him as though he were ‘our old pal upstairs’! There are Christians who would be modest enough to concede that they haven’t the foggiest notion what’s going on in the head of their pet budgerigar, but they are serenely confident that they know exactly what God thinks about the state of the economy, the poll tax, the Middle East crisis and nuclear power. Now, when we diminish God in this way, we devalue all his attributes so that his love is degraded into sentimentality, his power shades into benevolence, his holiness becomes prissiness.

There’s a line in that very well-known hymn, ‘God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform’ that runs, ‘Behind his frowning countenance, he hides a smiling face’. Now the God that we present in our day very often hasn’t any frowning countenance to hide behind, just the perpetual smile of a heavenly Cheshire cat.<sup>2</sup>

The concern here is not that it is wrong to say that God is personal and relational. Indeed, there is a sense in which Christians have a responsibility to debunk popular misunderstandings of God as some cold, disengaged deity who has little to do with everyday life. After all, says Morris, ‘we want to confront a Godless generation by a God who is easy to believe in’.<sup>3</sup> But it is perilous when we do that simply by imagining God as everything we know and love about human beings, multiplied by a million:

Now, our motive for doing that is quite honourable, but it is fundamentally mistaken. God is not a projection to infinity of the nicest person we’ve ever met. He comes

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2. Colin Morris, *Let God be God* (London: Broadcasting Support services, 1990), p.2.

3. *Ibid.*

to meet us out of the beyond as the Holy Other . . . there is a strangeness about him that mocks all our cocksure God-talk.<sup>4</sup>

This important corrective is vital if we are to really appreciate the power of the claim that in Christ a personal relationship with God is genuinely possible. If God is nothing more than the projection of our own humanity, then it is difficult to talk about a relationship with him in any meaningful way at all. That is to say, a relationship can only exist between two parties that are separate and distinctive. It is precisely because God is so mysterious and ‘holy other’ that the suggestion that we might have a personal relationship with him is so powerful. Indeed, the mystery of God is itself indicative of his grace:

Now why would God cloak himself in mystery at all? I suppose the simple answer is that if he did not cover himself in mystery we could not share this world with him. There is mercy in the mystery of God. We often talk about creation as though its purpose was to reveal God. In fact, you could equally argue that the purpose of creation is to hide God in order to protect us from the total impact of a reality that would destroy us. Demosthenes said, ‘If you cannot bear the candle, how will you face the sun?’

We cannot bear the candle. We live within the finest of tolerances. If our temperatures rise or fall by a mere handful of degrees, we die. Too much air pressure on us, or too little, and we implode or we explode. Too

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4. Ibid., pp.2-3.

much noise, too much silence, and we go mad. We can only bear a tiny fraction of the totality of reality and, therefore, there is no way we could bear the intolerable reality of God. That is why God said to Moses, ‘No man can look upon me face to face and live.’<sup>5</sup>

Only when we recognise the mysterious nature of God – the power of his ‘holy otherness’ – can we begin to appreciate the wonder of the grace by which he reaches out to us in Christ. God is mysterious, yet part of that mystery is that God invites us to open up to his closeness. This is an intimate presence that most of the time tends to be passed by unnoticed. God is much closer to us than we think. Let’s explore that.

For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

*Luke 11:10*

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5. Ibid., pp.3-4.

First week of Lent

## **Discipleship: the call to stay close**

### **Prayer**

Lord, you have come to us in Jesus, entering our broken world and making yourself known to us in and through him. Thank you that your desire is for us to be drawn to you, to know you and to follow you. As this season of Lent begins, we pray for a deepening of our relationship with you, that we may know your closeness in ever greater depth and power, day by day. Amen.

### **Introduction**

Do you think of yourself as a leader or a follower? The truth is, there's a bit of each in all of us.

There's a sense in which we all lead. We may not all hold positions of formally appointed leadership, but whether we recognise it or not, we all have influence on others around us through our words, actions and behaviour. We should not underestimate the ripples that our individual character makes, for better or for worse.

There's also a sense in which we all follow. That doesn't mean that we're all swept along mindlessly by the tide of popular opinion and culture. But we do all make our choices and decisions, great and small, based on things external to ourselves. Again, we may not be aware of what these things are, but all of us have our influences and we probably follow others more than we care to admit.

Christian faith is something far more radical and dynamic than deciding to believe God exists. It's about choosing who

to follow, believing that when we see Jesus, we see God. Recognising this means more than just saying 'OK, I'll accept this is true'. To accept the claims of Jesus is the most fundamentally life-changing decision that it is possible to make. If Jesus actually is who he claimed to be, it changes everything. That is why from the very beginning, Christians have been referred to not only as 'believers in Jesus' but 'followers' or 'disciples' of Jesus.

Let's be clear. To become a 'follower' of Jesus does not mean that we set aside our thinking, relinquish our individuality and submit ourselves to a religious institution that will curb our freedom and stop us being our true selves. The opposite is true. It is when we make it our choice to get to know Jesus and allow our decisions and our lifestyle to be led by him that we discover a new dimension to life, a new freedom, and become truly human. That is why Jesus said, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10). Elsewhere, he said:

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?'

*Matthew 16:24-26*

Following Jesus today, just as it did when he was on earth, impacts the decisions we make every day of our lives. Sometimes that can mean that the choices we make are costly to ourselves. The word 'disciple' is closely linked to the word 'discipline', which means it involves effort, self-control and, indeed,

self-denial. This can be hard work at times, but it is important to remember that none of this has to do with striving to ‘earn’ God’s approval – his love for us is infinite already.

‘Staying close’ to this truth is vital if our faith isn’t to amount to a mere list of prohibitions and religious rules – which can indeed be the very things that stop us being our true selves. At the heart of the gospel is the call to enter into a relationship with the living God. This must not be taken lightly or casually – it’s a costly business. Jesus calls us to ‘deny ourselves’ – which means putting God, then others, before our own desires. But when our starting point is a conviction that God loves us inexhaustibly, then we find that the very thing we desire most *is* to put God and others before ourselves, not because we have to, but because we want to.

### **Activity**

Think of as many different leaders as you can and write down their names. In the list, try to include some famous people, both living and from previous generations, and also other more locally known characters. Aim to include a mixture of characters ranging from public heroes through to brutal dictators.

Every leader is in fact a follower of some kind. That is to say, they are guided by something. Everyone has a belief system or set of values, as well as their own heroes and influential life experiences, even if they are not always readily recognised or identified.

Go through your list of leaders and try to identify the things or people that led, guided or influenced them.

In this first session we will be thinking about what it is and who it is that we follow in our daily lives.

**Reading:**

**Matthew 4:12-23**

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan,  
Galilee of the Gentiles –  
the people who sat in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of  
death light has dawned.’

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

## Comment

Jesus never said ‘go and make converts’, but he did command us to go and make *disciples* (Matthew 28:19). There is something deeply practical about this distinction. To become a Christian goes deeper than a one-moment-in-time conversion experience. Matthew shows Jesus preaching a message of repentance (4:17) and the first sign of response to it that we see is the act of fishermen dropping their nets and literally *following* Jesus. What we believe is intricately caught up with what we *do* with our lives. And the image of *following* conveys the sense in which this is an ongoing journey, during which we can expect to discover new things (see what the first disciples discovered very soon – Matthew 4:23-24!) and continually grow.

## Discussion

- The fishermen left their nets immediately and followed Jesus. What do you think it was about him that made them respond so quickly?
- The fishermen’s nets (verse 20) and boat (verse 22) would have represented their way of life, their security, their livelihood, and everything they were familiar with. Can you think of a decision that you made whereby the ‘Jesus way’ meant making a considerable sacrifice? What would be your ‘nets’ and your ‘boat’?
- What might it mean to be a ‘fisher of people’? What might that mean for followers of Jesus today?
- The words ‘disciple’ and ‘discipleship’ are closely linked to the word ‘discipline’, which has to do with effort and hard work. In what ways is following Jesus hard work? What sort of effort is called for?

- The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, ‘God’s grace is free but not cheap.’ What might this mean?

**and there’s more . . .**

An old story is told about a young man who, while travelling in the Southern States, came across a slave auction. He was shocked and sickened as human beings were sold off as property. Eventually a young woman was pushed onto the platform. The young man watched as two men bid against one another, all the while laughing about what they were planning to do with her. Anger welled up inside the young man, and finally, he yelled out a bid equal to the value of his whole estate. The crowd was stunned, and the young man went to pay the auctioneer.

Turning to the slave, the young man said ‘Young lady, you are free.’

She said, ‘What does that mean?’

‘It means I have bought you and I am setting you free. Here are your manumission papers,’ he replied.

‘Does that mean,’ she asked, ‘that I can be whatever I want to be, go where I want, and say what I want?’

‘Yes.’

The girl, with tears streaming down her face, said, ‘Then I will go with you. All I want to do is serve you.’

Authentic Christian discipleship involves staying close not to a sense of mere duty but to the grace of God.

## **Taking action**

What practical ‘disciplines’ might we undertake in order to stay close to God? As a group, think about what things you might all agree to undertake between now and the end of Lent (e.g. daily reading, praying in a new way, fasting). You may come up with several different ideas, but it’s probably most helpful if each individual chooses just one discipline to focus on (they don’t have to be the same for everyone, of course).

## **Prayer**

The following prayer is traditionally used by Methodist Christians in what they refer to as the ‘Covenant Service’. It’s a tradition that goes back to the founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley. In the service, usually held early in the new year, the prayer is said as a way of expressing a commitment to personal discipleship. The words ‘put me to suffering’ do not mean that we ask God to make us suffer, but that we ask for God’s help in whatever experience lies before us.

I am no longer my own but yours.  
 Put me to what you will,  
 rank me with whom you will;  
 put me to doing, put me to suffering;  
 let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,  
 exalted for you or brought low for you.  
 Let me be full, let me be empty,  
 let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
 I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things  
 to your pleasure and disposal.